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Response Paper, *Beloved*

*“You can’t repeat the past.”*

*“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!” He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.1*

The role of the past in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is ubiquitous. Its ability to define characters, as they struggle to define themselves apart from it, creates a stronghold on the possibilities for the future. Sethe, Paul D, and Baby Suggs’s pasts in slavery are constantly drudged up, and these characters are served constant reminders of the freedom they borrowed. On top of this, the metaphor of Beloved, as a present manifestation of a person who was alive only in the past, also demonstrates the inescapability of the past and its permanent ability to affect the present and the future.

In *Beloved*, the past is able to manifest itself in the present. The ghost of Beloved herself appears as a twenty-year-old girl in 124; Sethe’s “rememory” recalls Sweet Home in a way that prevents her from escaping it and causes her past to define her (though she puts focus on her hope for the future). This holds significance in that not only in this novel, but also in real life, history has a way of repeating itself. The appalling dark spot of our history that was slavery (which pragmatically speaking was not all that long ago) is still present in our world. According to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, approximately 12 to 27 million people are still victims of slavery worldwide.3 Many issues faced in the past continue to be faced in the future, and while Sethe’s family may want to look past the past because of the way it makes them “turn…around, make [them] doubt [themselves], wonder, plead, or confess” to things they just wish to bury, they are unable to escape it (152). This rings especially true for Sethe and her past with Beloved, as her actions (including waiting for her to finish work in the freezing cold, wearing no overcoat but holding one for Sethe) make it clear that she wants Sethe’s full attention.

With the issue of slavery there is consequently a twofold lack of identity for the slaves. The issue of lacking personal identity is seen throughout *Beloved*. This is especially true for baby Beloved, because at two years old, the formation of a complex personality is not typically expected. However race and the slave trade also impact this impediment to the sense of self. Race is so attached to identity that it is used as a single term to refer to a person: Amy is a “whitegirl,” and the “coloredpeople” at the carnival are also lumped together (105, 57). Both Paul D and Sethe encounter the inability to define their lives for themselves. At Sweet Home they are allowed to do things, which on the surface suggest a greater sense of freedom, but in the end it doesn’t matter because they are still in a position of subservience; they can marry, but there is no wedding. For Paul D, slavery and Beloved both cause him to question his masculinity because of the power they are able to hold over him (148). Baby Suggs admits that all she can really recall about her children is that one of her daughters enjoyed the burnt tops of biscuits, and yet concedes that she “knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like” (165). Baby Suggs forms an identity for herself when she is freed, and finally decides a name for herself that was not imposed on her by a bill of sale (167). This lack of identity stems from their pasts in slavery, and while Sweet Home can arguably be considered a better alternative to other plantations, there is still a suppression and a generalization of the slaves which clarifies their subordination and strips them of their individuality (most of the male slaves are even given the same name). There is also a lack of identity as a generation. When history is cyclical, nothing is unique to a generation; the same pattern is followed for a new generation as it was for the generation before it. Despite this, in the novel there seems to be a pervasive idea that the good potentiality of the future will cancel out the bad actuality of the past. The fact that Paul D suddenly develops the idea that having a baby with Sethe will solve his problems is a reflection of this (151). This disposition suggests that just by existing, the future generation will be different, and that just by existing, repair the scars and failings of the prior one. This is what Paul D has to believe, and yet in the chapters assigned, the reader gets a foreboding sense that this is untrue.

Discussion Question

How much do you believe your past impacts your identity?

Notes & Works Cited

1. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1996. Print.
2. "Slavery Today." *National Underground Railroad Freedom Center*. U.S. Department of Education Underground Railroad Educational and Cultural (URR) Program, n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2013. <http://freedomcenter.org/slavery-today>